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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Historic battle provides lessons for future leaders

By Capt. Anthony Deiss

FORT MEADE, S.D. – Events and decisions that led to the demise of Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and his 7th Cavalry Regiment is a lesson students from the Officer Candidate School at Fort Meade, are trying to learn from the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Hosted by the 196th Regiment, Regional Training Institute, South Dakota Army National Guard, more than 100 officer candidates and instructors traveled to the site of the battle in southeast Montana on Wednesday, July 9, to participate in a staff ride and study the battle that took place between Custer and the Sioux and Cheyenne on June 25, 1876.

“The purpose of a staff ride is to look at historic battles and see what happened on the ground,” said Lt. Col. Gary Miller, senior instructor and Rapid City resident. “It’s a learning exercise for the candidates – what did Custer do right, what did he do wrong, and how does that apply to scenarios the candidates may find themselves in on a future battlefield.”

Utilizing the principles of war, officer candidates study the battle in depth and dissect what went right for the Sioux and Cheyenne and what went wrong for Custer and the more than 260 men that died under his command. The students visit the actual site of the battle and integrate the lessons derived from it.

“The staff ride really brings all the lessons we’ve learned together – teaching us to be effective leaders,” said Officer Candidate Keith Bryant of Sturgis. “It’s a great way to look at both sides – not only in Custer’s failures but also how the Native Americans had success in this battle.”

“You have so many elements that are happening; small unit activities, command and control, maneuverability,” said Miller. “Both Custer and the Native Americans were fighting, reacting, learning and changing their tactics – that is what we are seeing in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

“It’s an excellent opportunity to visualize the battlefield,” added Officer Candidate Eric Tobin of Rapid City. “There is only so much you can take in from the classroom, but when you walk where the battle actually took place it becomes clear in your mind what actually happened, and why they did some of the things they did.”

This is the second year the Little Bighorn staff ride has been offered as part of the curriculum at the RTI. Developed by retired Sgt. Maj. Robert McPherson, it has become an important part of developing military leaders.

“The staff ride’s sole purpose is to further the professional development of U.S. Army leaders,” said McPherson, instructor for the College of Eastern Utah: San Juan Campus, Blanding, Utah. “It’s a versatile educational tool used to train junior officers in military tactical thought and operational art.”

McPherson wrote a staff ride book for the training institute with maps and graphics outlining the battle in every detail. With military teaching points and eyewitness narratives, the book gives a gripping account of the events that day.

“What we are trying to stress are the nine principles of war and implement those in the student’s minds,” said McPherson. “Hopefully they will walk away from this experience understanding what they are learning had application back then as well as today.”

Both instructors and candidates alike feel this particular battle is especially suited for helping young leaders prepare for future combat operations and the lessons learned from it will be applied by the next generation of military leaders.

“With Civil War battles – where there were brigades, regiments and armies and thousands of Soldiers and moving parts – it’s hard for candidates to understand the scope and complexity of what is happening,” said McPherson. “The Little Bighorn battle is ideal for the candidates because you have smaller elements and it’s not too complex to grasp what is going on.”

“I think the lessons we learn from the battle are very applicable to today’s war zone,” said Bryant. “We are fighting a very non-conventional enemy like Custer was. We have to be prepared for anything and the most probable course of action isn’t always the most likely.”

“Waging war is the lot of mankind,” added McPherson. “Perhaps from this particular experience, lessons will be learned to help avoid future errors.”



080709-A-9937D-009: Retired Sgt. Maj. Robert McPherson describes the battle scene to officer candidates from the Officer Candidate School at the 196th Regiment, Regional Training Institute, South Dakota Army National Guard, during a staff ride on Wednesday, July 9, at the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn in southeast Montana. The candidates are studying the battle that took place between Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and his 7th Cavalry Regiment and the Sioux and Cheyenne on June 25, 1876. (National Guard photo by Capt. Anthony Deiss) (RELEASED)

Link to photo: <https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/080709-A-9937D-009.jpg>



080709-A-9937D-064: Officer candidates Keith Bryant (right) and Eric Tobin from the Officer Candidate School at the 196th Regiment, Regional Training Institute, South Dakota Army National Guard read the grave marker of a fallen Soldier on the hill of “Custer’s Last Stand” during a staff ride on Wednesday, July 9, at the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn in southeast Montana. In the background stands a memorial dedicated to the more than 260 Soldiers who lost their lives in the battle between Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and his 7th Cavalry Regiment and the Sioux and Cheyenne on June 25, 1876. (National Guard photo by Capt. Anthony Deiss) (RELEASED)

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080709-A-9937D-016: Officer candidates from the Officer Candidate School at the 196th Regiment, Regional Training Institute, South Dakota Army National Guard, describe the battle scene from a Soldier vignette during a staff ride on Wednesday, July 9, at the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn in southeast Montana. The candidates are studying the battle that took place between Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and his 7th Cavalry Regiment and the Sioux and Cheyenne on June 25, 1876. (National Guard photo by Capt. Anthony Deiss) (RELEASED)

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080709-A-9937D-048: Officer candidates from the Officer Candidate School at the 196th Regiment, Regional Training Institute, South Dakota Army National Guard, survey the battle scene from the vantage point of Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer on the location of what is known as “Custer’s Last Stand” during a staff ride on Wednesday, July 9. The site, also known as “Custer Hill,” is now a memorial dedicated to the more than 260 Soldiers who lost their lives to the Sioux and Cheyenne in the Battle of the Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876, in southeast Montana. (National Guard photo by Capt. Anthony Deiss) (RELEASED)

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